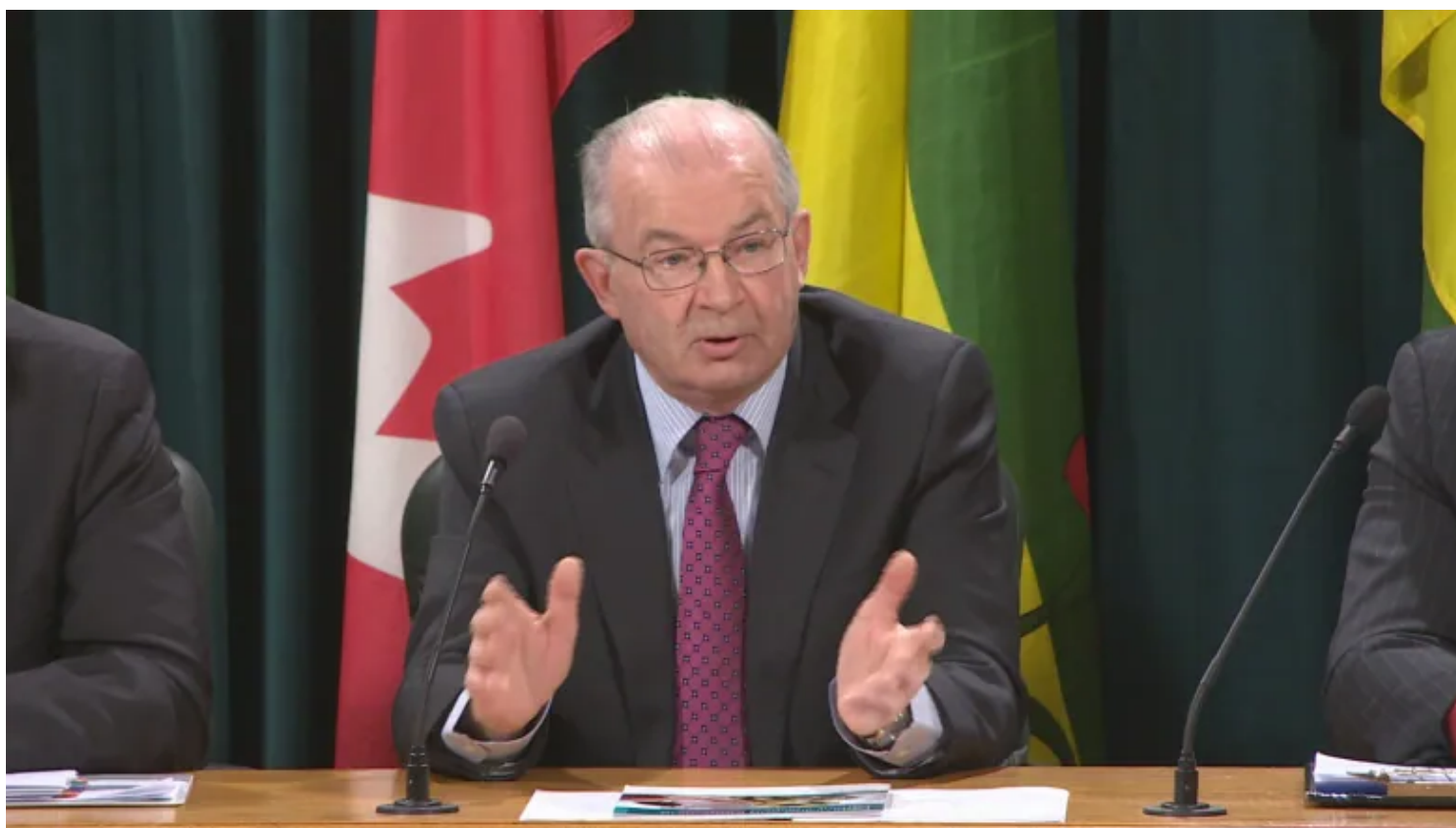


Saskatchewan

Not mandating masks for rural Sask. is 'illogical' and political, says doctor

New mask order covers cities and surrounding areas, but some rural areas have higher rates

[Jason Warick](#) · CBC News · Posted: Nov 16, 2020 12:55 PM CT | Last Updated: November 16, 2020



Saskatoon health policy consultant Dr. Dennis Kendel says it's 'illogical' for the government to exempt rural Saskatchewan from the new COVID-19 masking order. (Trent Peppler/CBC)



Exempting rural Saskatchewan from the province's new mandatory mask order makes no sense, because some rural areas have far higher rates than the cities, says the former registrar of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan.

"It's illogical," said Dr. Dennis Kendel, the former CPSS registrar who now works as a Saskatoon health policy consultant.

"COVID doesn't care what size of community you live in."

A mandatory mask order for indoor public spaces was put in place earlier this month, but only for Saskatoon, Regina and Prince Albert. Starting Monday, that order was expanded to include all communities with populations more than 5,000, as well as bedroom communities of the three largest cities.

According to government data compiled by CBC News, the Saskatoon, Regina and Prince Albert regions have between 1.2 and 1.8 active COVID-19 cases for every 1,000 residents.

In "North Central 1," a rural region that includes Shellbrook and other towns with no mask requirements, the per capita rate is three times as high, at 4.8 cases per 1,000 people.

Kendel said the government order is neither scientifically nor medically sound. He said he's heard many people suggest the Saskatchewan Party government is pandering to its rural power base, and he agrees.

"I really hoped this wasn't going to be political, but there's really no other explanation," Kendel said.

He said there's no also other way to explain a mask exemption for the Shellbrook region, home of Premier Scott Moe.

A closer examination of the bedroom communities listed by the government shows Shellbrook, located 44 kilometres from Prince Albert, is exempt. But other towns and villages farther away from cities are required to wear masks. Shields, for example, is covered by the order and is 52 kilometres from Saskatoon.

"This should not continue," he said.

Kendel said the solution is obvious: make the order province-wide.

The orders are issued by the province's chief medical health officer, Dr. Saqib Shahab. Kendel said Shahab wants everyone to wear masks, but the government isn't following his advice.

Kendel said Shahab may legally have the power to issue orders, but the government is likely exerting enormous pressure on him.

"They've put him in a political straightjacket," Kendel said.

- [**New COVID-19 measures not nearly enough, says letter signed by nearly 300 Sask. doctors**](#)
- [**Worried Northern Sask. communities call on province for blanket mandatory mask order**](#)

The expanded order was announced Friday by Shahab and Health Minister Paul Merriman. The decision to not make the order cover the whole province was condemned in a letter signed by more than 400 doctors in a variety of specialties across the province. The Saskatchewan Union of Nurses, as well as other groups representing doctors, pharmacists and others have demanded a provincewide mask policy.

Also on Friday, the Saskatchewan Health Authority confirmed that the intensive care units of Saskatoon hospitals are so full that most out of town ICU patients are being sent to smaller centres.

On Saturday, Saskatchewan set a new single-day COVID-19 case record with 308.

Premier Scott Moe, who did not attend Friday's news conference, sent a message on Twitter over the weekend. After extending condolences to the families of the latest two COVID-19 fatalities, he said "further measures are being considered."

A Ministry of Health official emailed to say rural public spaces are not as big a concern as urban ones, but they are reviewing all options.

"Further expansion of masking orders remains an option and will be part of on-going discussions," read the statement.

"It is recommended that all residents wear a mask when outside the home, regardless of their community or region."

The province said that more restrictions are being considered and that Moe and Shahab will hold a news conference Tuesday at 3 p.m. CST.

What's yours? CBC Saskatchewan wants to hear how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted you. Share your story with our [online questionnaire](#).

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